

# Magic of Nat King Cole's swinging jazz re-created in tribute



Monty Alexander plays musical homage to Nat King Cole.

By STEVE WISSINK  
Staff Writer

**B**y his own admission, Monty Alexander has a bad case of hero worship.

He is virtually obsessed with the late jazz/pop musician, Nat King Cole.

As a boy growing up in Jamaica, Alexander and his family would sing Cole's pop tunes.

Today, as a 42-year-old professional pianist relocated in Orlando, Alexander has dreams that Cole talks to him — not about pop music, though, but about the swinging jazz that Cole performed before turning to more profitable ventures as a pop artist in the late '40s.

As a result of his lifelong admiration, Alexander is paying tribute to his idol, both in concert and on vinyl.

*To Nat With Love* is a soon-to-be-released album of Cole's better tunes, performed live by Alexander in December at New York City's Blue Note Club.

"He won legions of fans, people who normally never cared how well you played or whether you could play sophisticated harmonies," Alexander said, in a telephone interview. "Although he operated from a frame of mind as a vocalist, at no time would anyone say that lessened his jazz playing."

The Blue Note show, which won strong reviews, is being revived at Miami's Gusman Cultural Center tonight and at Fort Lauderdale's Parker Playhouse on Saturday.

■ Monty Alexander will perform *To Nat With Love* tonight at 8:30 at the Gusman Cultural Center in Miami. Tickets cost between \$10 and \$17.50. He performs Saturday at 8 p.m. at Parker Playhouse in Fort Lauderdale. Tickets are \$15 and \$17.50. All tickets can be purchased at Bass outlets and at the box office.

For Alexander, the affectionate tribute is a change of pace from his internationally acclaimed calypso and jazz style. It didn't come until after he was sure he was up to the task.

"In concert, I occasionally would throw in a Nat King Cole tune," Alexander said. "People would ask me to do more, but I never had the confidence that I could."

"In the middle of the night last year, I had a dream where Nat King Cole literally said to me, 'Go ahead and do this [tribute]. I had a sense that it was OK. If I did it, the spirit of Nat King Cole would not be disturbed.'"

Alexander's dream has become a musical fantasy to fans of classy music that swings. Only the most passive of listeners can sit through the album without tapping their toes or snapping their fingers.

The album contains 12 of Cole's better tunes, including five exciting and beautiful jazz instrumentals. They include *Unforgettable*, *What is This Thing Called Love*, *Moonlight in Vermont* and *Honeysuckle Rose*.

The rest is made up of some of Cole's better vocal arrangements, including *Too Marvelous for*

*Words, The Trouble With Me is You, Straighten Up and Fly Right* and *Gee Baby, Ain't I Good to You*.

On the album and in concert, Alexander relies on the same format as Cole; the drummerless trio. For the South Florida shows, Alexander will be joined by bassist Ray Brown and Herb Ellis, a guitarist who polished his skills in the '40s with pianist Oscar Peterson.

"Nat King Cole made those three instruments into a symphony," Alexander said. "He created his own way of tastefully and economically making a jazz group into a chamber group."

"People forget, but he was an incredible jazz player; he set a whole new pace in jazz music," Alexander said. "He left this piano tradition that was picked up by a lot of other people who became popular — Johnny Mathis, Oscar Peterson, Ahmad Jamal."

Alexander never met Cole, although he saw him once in concert in Jamaica and has met Cole's brother, Freddie.

But, through his music, Alexander feels he knows his Cole probably better than anyone else in the music business.

"It's awkward trying to put into words," he said. "It's uncanny. I feel like his spirit has somewhat lodged in mine. This man was so gifted and such a light in personality, that he lights me up when he would sing and play."

"I want to share the feeling I have for him with people who may have forgotten how truly wonderful he was."